



# Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 14  
Issue 2 October 2010

Article 11

6-2-2016

## Black Swan

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### Recommended Citation

Plate, S. Brent (2016) "Black Swan," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 2 , Article 11.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol14/iss2/11>

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# Black Swan

## **Abstract**

This is a review of *Black Swan* (2010).

### **Natalie's Neck: An Anatomy of Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan***

The French cultural critic Roland Barthes once wrote about "The Face of Garbo." Greta Garbo's countenance was a prime metonymic image of a time "when the face represented a kind of absolute state of the flesh, which could be neither reached nor renounced... Garbo offered to one's gaze a sort of Platonic Idea of the human creature." The larger-than-life face on screen confronts viewers as its gazes down, showing deeper versions of reality, loftier forms, new worlds. Viewers sit, returning the gaze, and become transported into Ideal life, transcending this-world reality.

The cinematic age of Garbo's face, with its otherworldly, mystical revelations, evolves in Darren Aronofsky's latest film, *Black Swan*. This is the age of Natalie's neck.

Sinewy and elongated, sternomastoid muscles strained, Natalie Portman's neck too represents a particular state of the flesh, but what it ultimately brings to light are not metaphysical Platonic Ideas. There are no hierophanies coming down from above. Instead, Portman's visceral performance as ballerina Nina Sayers begins with toes on a wood floor, cracking from the weight of her body. Metaphorically, and sometimes explicitly, the camera works its way up her body to

her neck, the meeting point between the mind and body, between physics and metaphysics.

Thomas Leroy, the director of a ballet company in the film, chooses Nina to play the Swan Queen for the company's rendition of Swan Lake, a role that requires performing both the cunning "Black Swan" and the innocent "White Swan." *Black Swan* is full of doubles, twins, doppelgangers; those ancient mythological character structures we humans never seem to outgrow – though the broken and split mirrors throughout the film's mise en scène become a bit tedious. Black is white and white is black, and what we think is separate stems from the same body.

The doubling motif is seen throughout the film, and Nina feels pressure from her various pairings: from her former ballerina mother who lives viciously-vicariously through her daughter's success; from another dancer, Lily, who lives out the yin to Nina's yang; from the taskmaster director, Thomas (the name "Thomas" means "twin," and he becomes Aronofsky's double); and from Bet, the aging prima ballerina who has mutilated her own body in response to Thomas' choice of Nina for the key role. The pressures also well up from within Nina, and it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish reality from fantasy, for Nina or for those of us watching in the theater. The confusions meet within Nina's own body as the mind and flesh compete, the stress palpitating within the lines of her neck.

Whether or not the swan song sacrificially sutures it all together is left to the viewers.

At the same time, the film itself has its own doppelganger: Aronofsky's last film, *The Wrestler*.<sup>1</sup> The masculinity of professional wrestling is refracted in the femininity of professional ballet. These two films demonstrate how the extremes of masculinity and femininity don't look much different: One body may weigh more but, beyond that, similarities cease. For each film, the actors themselves underwent serious physical training, altering their own "real life" appearances. In each film, particular bodies (Mickey Rourke's, Portman's) become the focus for the camera. And in each, handheld cameras follow characters from behind (cinematographer Matthew Libatique has worked with Aronofsky on all his films). This is especially apparent in the backstage area when in *The Wrestler* "The Ram" (Rourke) moves around corridors backstage before entering the fighting ring. Nearly identical shots appear in *Black Swan* as the camera follows Nina from backstage to center stage. In each, the character is transitioning from one self to the other, private to public, embodying an alternate identity to the point where the seams between the two worlds are covered over. And, in each, that necessary outcome that all mortal bodies share creates the conclusion. Perfection is reached. It is finished. The body has done what the body thinks it must do.

Crucially, the intimate, follow-along camera shots, especially in the transitional spaces, also become connecting points between characters and viewers. As the camera follows the protagonist, the viewer feels as if she/he is right there, following along, taking the very same journey as the protagonist. We begin to feel the weight of the characters' bodies and their suffering, some via *dolorosa* in which the viewers' own bodies cringe and crawl to the sight and sound of crumbling onscreen bodies with their cracking bones and peeling skin. No need for 3-D if you can coordinate sound and image just right, which is one of Aronofsky's great gifts as a filmmaker.

*Black Swan* is one part *Fight Club* (with its psychotic doubling and the prominence of masochistic bodies), one part *The Company* (Robert Altman's behind the scenes look at a ballet company), and one part *Psycho* (Hitchcock's twist on Freudian psychoanalysis and domineering mothers). But it is an Aronofsky film through and through. Even the body-horror stuff is not generally new for Aronofsky. It goes right back to his first and great feature film, *P* (1998). Indeed, several scenes are lifted directly from there.

Aronofsky has been singularly obsessed with some sort of relation between body and mind through all his films. The obsession is not an issue of mind over matter, though sometimes it is; nor is it matter over mind, though sometimes it is. *P*'s protagonist Max lives a life of the mind, to the detriment of his body. *Black*

*Swan's* Nina lives in the body to the detriment of her mind. Both, nonetheless, desire perfection, a harmonizing of the two, however elusive. Between and across the extremes Aronofsky pushes toward the edge of the struggle, the conflicts at which spirit and matter meet. Whether pill-popping, consciousness-extending, or body-brutalizing, always-genius characters reach across the mind-body divide.

And so it is the neck, the elongated swan's neck of Natalie, that becomes the still point of the still turning world: The meeting point between head and heart, brain and body, where bone, muscle, and tendon delicately connect two worlds.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information see Plate, S. Brent, 2009, *RD Magazine (Religious Dispatch)* February 17 essay. *Pop-Eye: Meat The Wrestler*.